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# **Planning for Graduate Enrollment Growth by Capitalizing on Your Strengths**

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**Amy Mikel**, Executive Director of Marketing & Admissions, Erikson Institute  
**Vaughn Shinkus**, Vice President and Strategic Account Executive, RNL

# Our Agenda

1. Introductions and Session Objectives
2. Market Perspective: Graduate Student Expectations
3. Case Study: Erikson Institute
4. Case Study: Agnes Scott College
5. Wrap Up and Key Takeaways

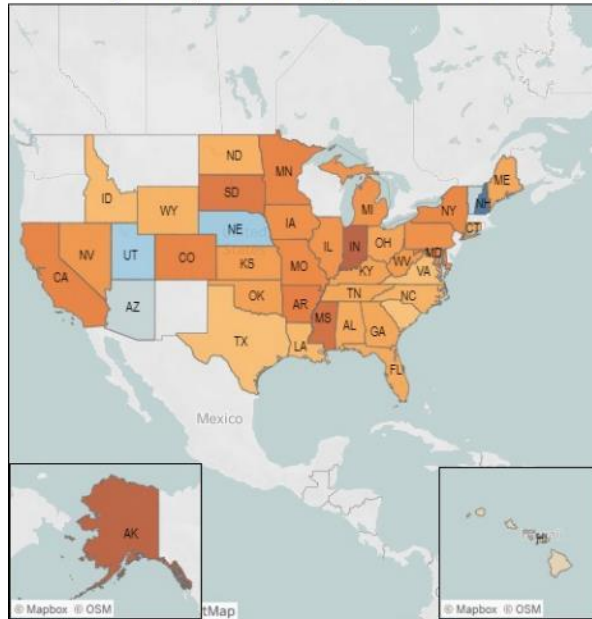
# **Market Perspective: What Do Graduate Students Expect?**



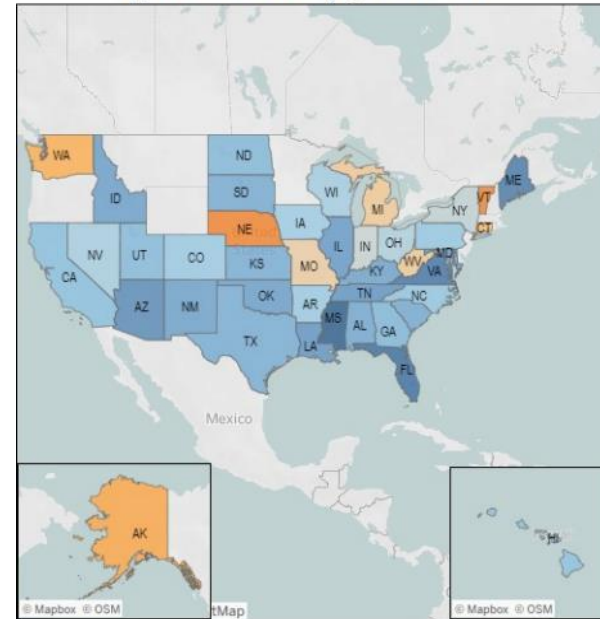
# Graduate is growing while undergraduate is shrinking in the United States

Fall 2019-2021 enrollment change

Undergrad

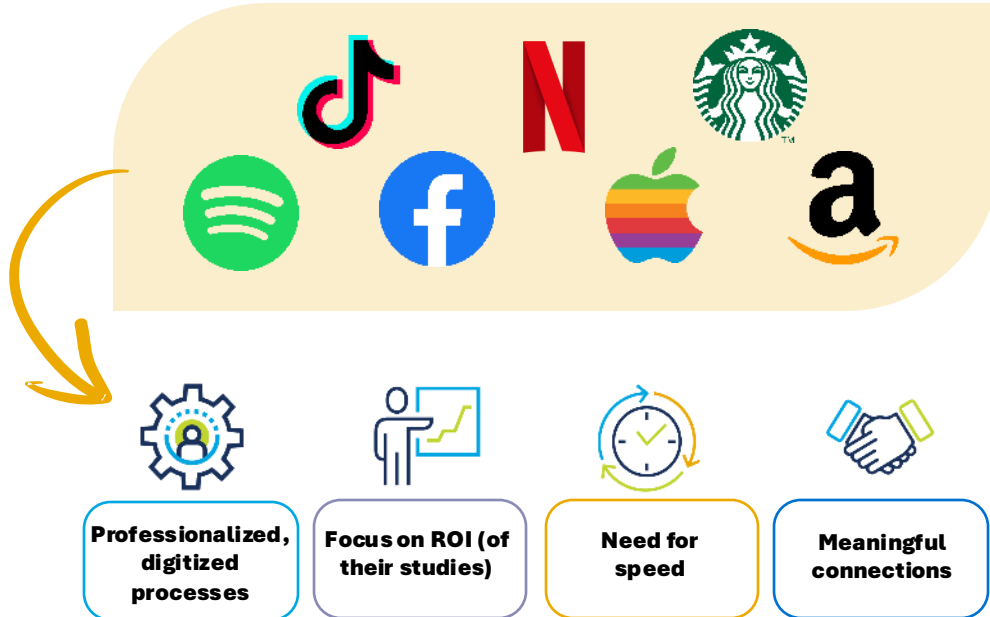


Graduate



# Expectations Have Changed

Technology (and AI) has changed today's students, and they expect higher ed to keep up.



## Student Generations Have Shifted

Graduate Education is now dominated by Millennials and GenZ

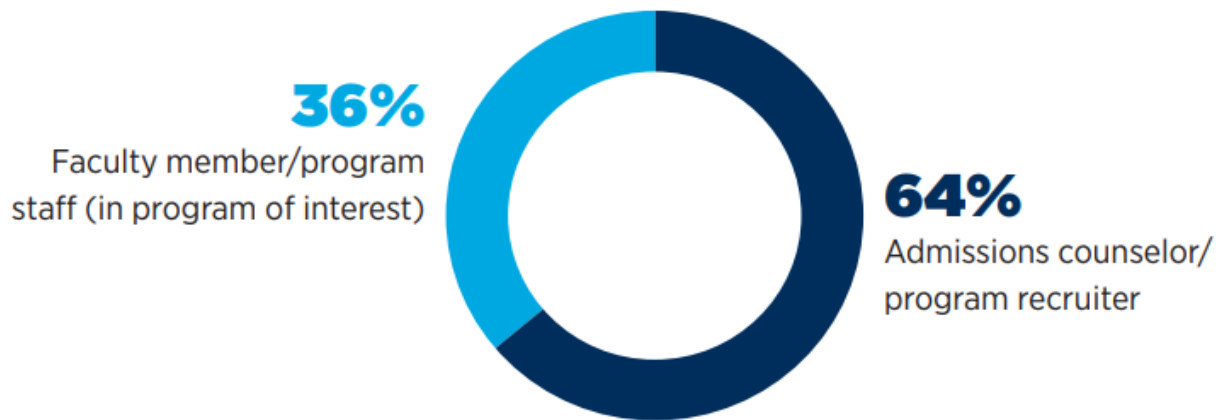
# 65%

of grad students are Millennials (and Gen Z exceeds Gen X in numbers)

Sources: RNL 2023 Graduate Student Recruitment Report; RNL Surveys; CASE VSE 2023

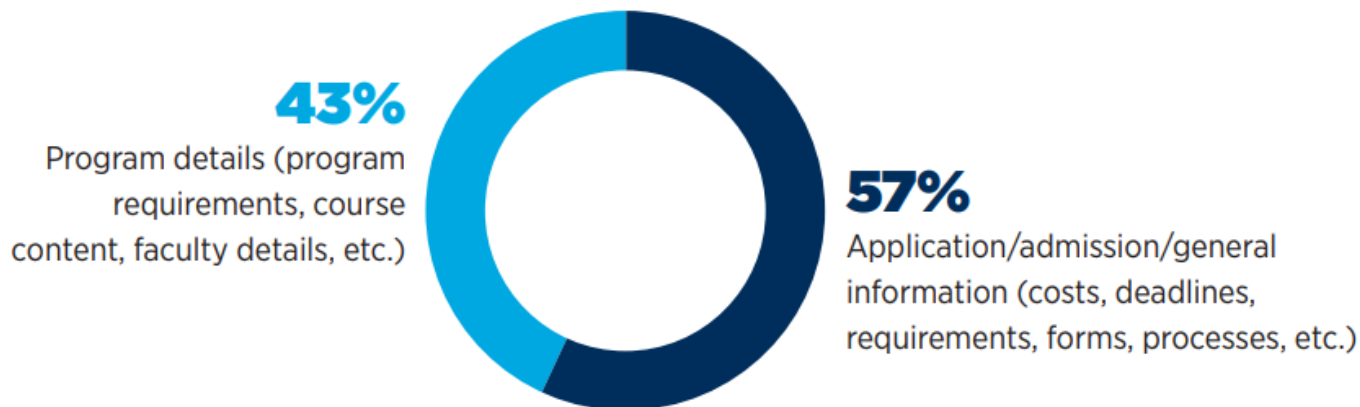
# Graduate students prefer to interact first with a recruiter vs. a faculty member

Who would you prefer to respond to your early inquiries/questions during your search?



# Graduate students are looking for general information rather than program details

What are you more likely to be looking for when reaching out to programs of interest before submitting your application?



# A robust communication plan, led by email, is an essential

How do you prefer schools/programs respond to you?



**71%**

Email



**14%**

Phone calls



**9%**

Text message



**3%**

Social media  
platform



**3%**

Mail



# Graduate students expect a response within hours

After how long do you expect a response to an inquiry or question in the preferred channel you cited above?



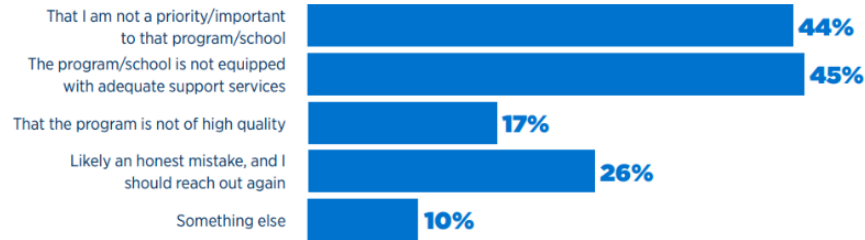
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# 37%

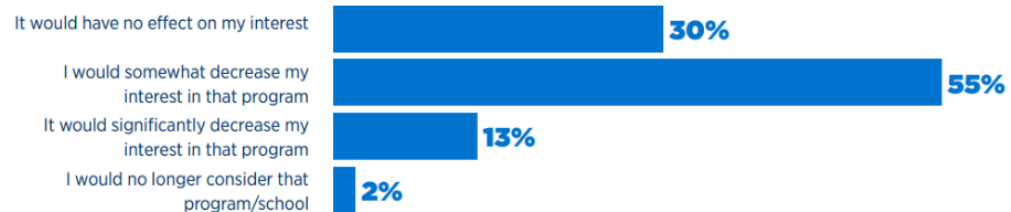
Of graduate students expect a response within 3 hours

# A response that takes more time than expected reduces interest and creates negative impressions

## What does a slow response signify to you?



## To what extent did/would a slow response affect your willingness to consider a particular program?



# Personalized attention is vital to successful recruitment

IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALIZED COMMUNICATION	ALL
Very important	15%
Important	49%
Neutral	18%
Not very important	15%
Not at all important	2%

ACCEPTABLE AND PREFERRED RESPONSE METHOD	ACCEPTABLE	PREFERRED
Personalized Email	95%	57%
Non-Personalized Email	67%	7%
Some other method	N/A	37%

Source: 2021 Graduate Student Recruitment Report

# **Erikson Institute: Swimming With the Big Fish**



# Erikson Institute

## Where Knowledge, Research, and Policy Meet

Because nothing matters more than a child's early years,  
Erikson Institute educates, inspires, and provides leadership  
to serve the needs of children and families  
so that all can achieve  
optimal educational, social, emotional, and physical well-being.



# Early Care & Education Crisis

- Existing campus-based teacher licensure program with historically low enrollment
- Highly competitive market in Chicago
- Well documented teacher shortages and turnovers
- COVID crisis amplified issues



**Teacher turnover is 50 percent higher in high-poverty than in low-poverty schools<sup>4</sup>**

# Early Care & Early Education

## Situation...Opportunity?

1. Illinois at crisis level<sup>1</sup> with teacher shortage and racial demographics in early education classrooms
2. Teacher diversity in preschool and elementary school is crucial to Black and Brown student success rates<sup>3</sup>
3. Shared student-teacher demographics positively impact student success including short term expectations<sup>4</sup> and in the long term<sup>5</sup>

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**+70%**

Of teachers in Illinois are White and the population of young children is over 50% Black & Brown<sup>2</sup>



# Erikson Institute's Strategic Enrollment Planning

Leverage Erikson's **mission & deep expertise** to create differentiation

**Curriculum** revised to better prepare teachers for the inclusive classrooms of today

Program availability to mirror the **modality preferences** of graduate students of today

**Provide supports** beyond conferral to help decrease burnout and turnover

Build pathways to making graduate school more **affordable**

**Strengthen enrollment marketing** and recruiting efforts to drive applications

**Goal: Diversify teacher workforce**

# Introducing Erikson's Reimagined & Transformed Teacher Licensure Program in Illinois



Early Childhood with a focus on  
Child Development

English as a Second  
Language / Bilingual  
Education

Special Education

# Master's in Early Childhood Education

## “Triple Endorsement”

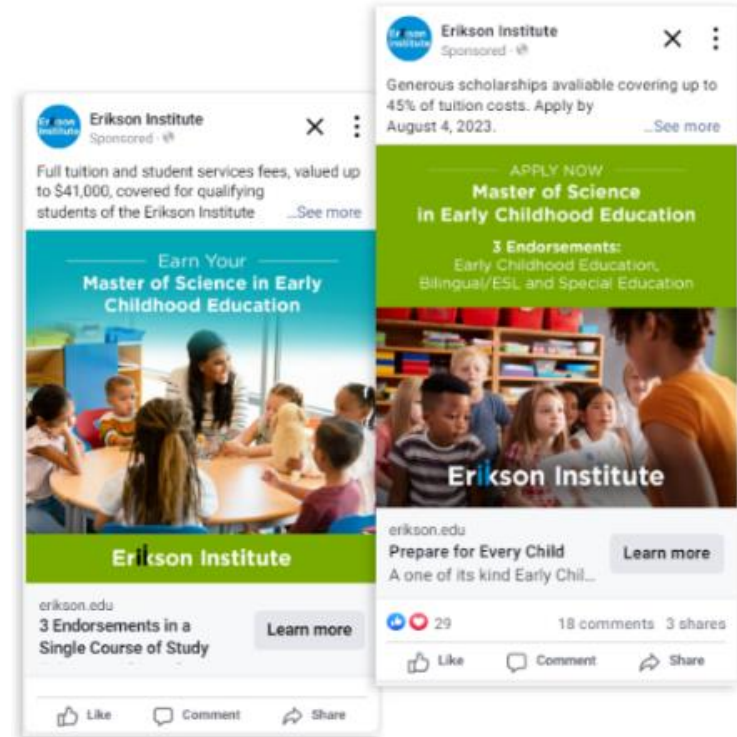
- Licensure + 3 embedded endorsements
- 36 Credit Hours
- Full-time & Part-time options
- Hybrid & Online modalities
- Full Tuition Grants available for qualifying students with 4-year service obligation
- Professional Learning Community



# Strategic Enrollment Marketing

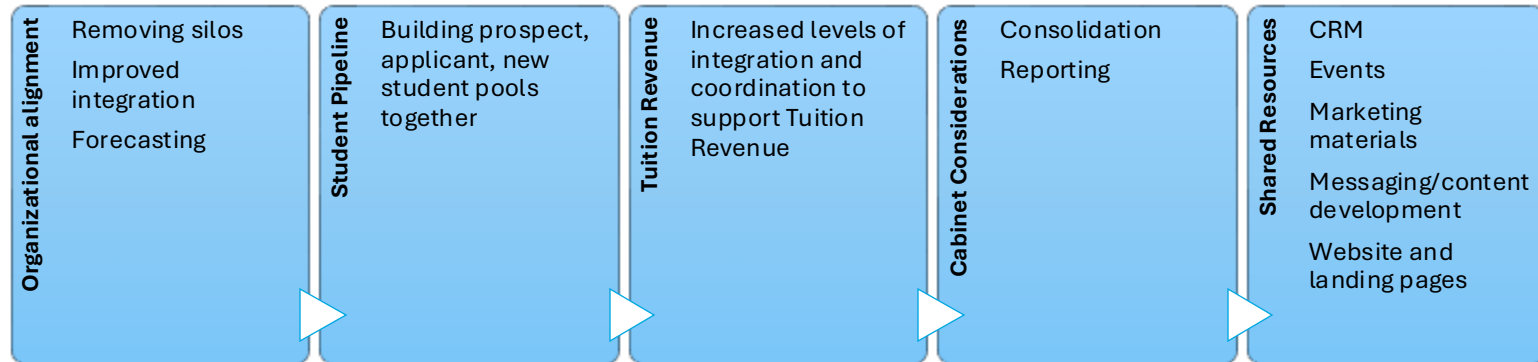
## Erikson's New Marketing & Admissions Team

- Branding & messaging framework
  - Personas
- Audience targeting
  - Prospects/inquiries
  - Influencers & employers
- Integrated Marketing campaign
  - Paid, owned & earned media
- Recruiting
- Events & grad fairs



# Restructure of Erikson Institute's Enrollment Team

- Goal: An organizational design that better attends to demand and revenue generation functions to meet Erikson's strategic goals
- Admissions reports into Marketing and became part of the External Affairs team
- Built team from scratch – primary hire was new Director of Admissions; subsequent hire for Assistant Director of Admissions; recruiting for Admissions manager now



# Erikson Institute Results

## Exceeding Expectations

- Erikson had the single largest summer term start in our 55+ year history and exceeded enrollment goal by 10%
- Triple Endorsement's initial Fall term exceeded enrollment goal by 65%
- Grew student body diversity within Triple Endorsement program
  - From an average of 20-45% people of color in prior teacher licensure program to average of 75%
- Attained the highest level of student body diversity to date across entire graduate school – 48% students of color



# +500%

Increased average number of new students by over 500% per term in reimagined teacher licensure program

# **Agnes Scott College: Building on Your Strengths**



# Establishing (or reimagining) programs that align with brand and institutional mission

- Creating a vision for grad recruitment in a traditional institution
  - Brand alone is not enough
  - Find your niche (while avoiding the super-narrow)
  - Flexibility to pivot
  - Strengths are not always obvious







Finding the hidden gem:

**Graduate enrollment grew from 7  
in 2019 to 70 in 2024**

# Leveraging your mission to distinguish yourself

- Turning a traditional graduate program into your own
  - SEO matters
  - More than marketing content - embody your mission through your recruitment efforts and within curriculum
  - Maintain the integrity of programs and mission



# Challenges of change in an undergraduate-focused culture

## Processes and systems

- Grad students inserted into processes designed to support undergraduate students
- Systems developed for traditional admission cycle

## Recruitment cycles and marketing

- Recruitment schedule differs and cycles are prolonged
- Marketing differentiation

Flexibility and agility are key to successful recruitment

# Making the case for investment

What did we prioritize?



## Staffing

What can we do to support retention while meeting our goals?



## Curriculum

How can we remain flexible and adapt to student needs?



## Outsourcing

What operations or tasks can be outsourced to increase efficiency?

# Conversation and Key Takeaways



# What do recruiters need to keep in mind?

## Five things graduate students tell us

- 1** You are actively competing with other programs—and the market is competitive.
- 2** You are competing with local institutions even if they are not your identified “peer institutions.”
- 3** **Two-thirds** of graduate students expect a response to their initial inquiry and other follow-up questions within **24** hours.
- 4** Nearly **half** of graduate students think a slower-than-expected response indicates they are unimportant to the institution/program and/or low program quality.
- 5** More than **60%** of graduate students will likely or definitely enroll in the program that responds to their inquiry first.

# Thank you!



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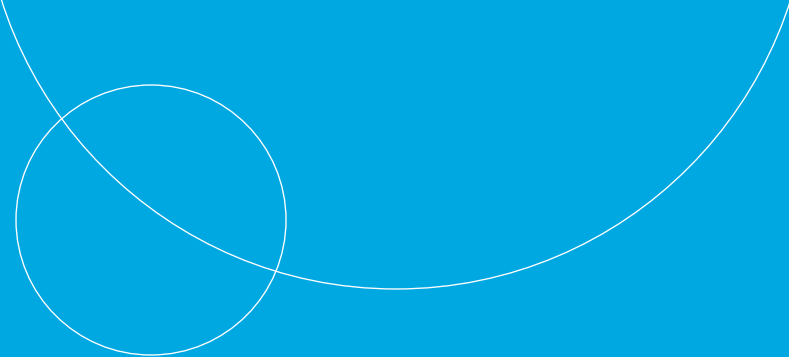
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